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Science and Practice of Yoga

By

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SCIENCE AND PRACTICE OF YOGA

As physical science strives to demonstrate the laws of the material universe before it accepts them, so the science of Yoga seeks to prove the laws of the spiritual world. The one is the science of the seen, the other the science of the unseen. The aim of both is knowledge, but the processes employed necessarily differ. When people out of spiritual yearning want to prove the deeper facts of existence, Yoga offers them certain methods by which the revelation of these facts can be gained. The word means literally "union"—union between subject and object. Knowledge takes place through this union. There must always be some point of contact. We cannot know Truth from a distance. We may make a mental picture of it, but it cannot be exact. For precise knowledge there must be contact and this contact is Yoga.

There are, however, certain qualifications which we must possess before we can gain this union. First of all we must gather up our scattered forces

and establish perfect unity in our own organism, between body, mind and soul. The Yoga system is not limited to the spiritual. It applies equally to all planes of activity. Its practices are directed along three distinct lines,—physical, mental and spiritual. The first step deals with that which is most immediate to us—our body. This special branch is known in India as Hatha-Yoga. Its chief aim is to establish a healthy balanced condition in the body through physical exercises, postures and by regulating the functions of the breath. It teaches us how to control every muscle, how to command all our energy, so that this physical organism which is now so often a drawback may become a powerful instrument for higher investigation. Through its practices we learn to carry ourselves with lightness and balance. A systematic knowledge of this branch of Yoga also helps us to prevent disease and decay. Longevity is one of the natural results of its study. Yogis live long because they know the laws of life and do not go against them, but we do not obey them because we are ignorant of them. People become nervous wrecks and invalids wholly because they transgress these laws. Yoga helps us to discover them and shows us how to obey them.

We imagine that we are born with certain tendencies and that these compel us to act in a cer-

tain way; but a Hatha Yogi—one who has attained absolute mastery over his body—claims that this is a mistake, that we have hypnotized ourselves into this negative thought, that there is no reason why we should follow blindly all our physical instincts. He tells us that we have latent powers within us, by awakening which we can unite our forces and gain all the strength necessary for complete mastery. Now we rush headlong, impelled by our self-imposed desires, until utterly exhausted we reach a state which we call old age. Yoga teaches that this is due wholly to our limited apprehension of the laws of life; that if we will but study our organism and learn to use it with moderation and understanding, we may make of this body a most efficient and valuable instrument. There are people who live long yet never appear aged or worn out. This is because the Spirit within is beyond all time, space and causation; and as man is able to turn his thoughts to that Spirit it brings him an ever fresh supply of *Prana* or Life-Force.

The method by which we gain perfect control and balance in our physical system is known as *Asanam* or posture. The study of psychology shows that the greatest part of our activity originates in the spinal column, where all the main nerve centres are located. Therefore it becomes

necessary for us to keep this passage clear by sitting, walking and lying properly, in order that the life current may not be obstructed. Abnormal positions may wholly block our higher progress. Through experience we know that different states of mind tend to express themselves by certain positions of the body; grief and depression bend down the head and spine and contract the muscles, while joy expands the chest and lifts the whole frame.

The reverse is equally true; when we hold the body in certain positions, it seems to awaken certain kinds of thoughts. These fall into three general classes, called in Sankrit *Sattwa*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas*. Those thoughts which stimulate our lower brute instincts are produced by *Tamas*. They bring a sense of quietness, but it is the quietude of lethargy, not of concentrated energy. The second class, born of *Rajas*, give rise to nervous excitement, manifesting as excessive ambition, envy, jealousy, discontent and all those states of mind which spring from lack of poise. *Sattwa* is the balancing factor between these two extremes. Through the systematic practice of various postures we can overcome both physical heaviness and nervous unrest; the muscles and bones can be made more flexible, the flow of the nerve currents more even; and the whole system

will gain greater lightness and endurance as well as better health.

Yoga offers a vast number of different postures, each of which is supposed to quicken certain latent forces in the nerve centres. Many of them are very intricate and practically impossible for ordinary persons. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, being the steadiest of all postures, has been adopted throughout the Orient; and all the varying postures in Yoga are based on this fundamental position; but those to whom this is difficult can gain good results by sitting on a straight chair, of such a height that the legs from the thigh to the knee are perfectly horizontal and the feet firmly planted on the ground. The principal points to keep in mind are:—The back, neck and head must be in a straight line and the chest erect, so that the nerve currents may have free action; there must not be the slightest leaning forward or backward or at any angle. The lips must be kept closed, but the teeth must not touch; while the hands must be relaxed and rest in the lap. At first such a posture may seem unnatural, but Yoga declares that what we consider natural may be really unnatural and what is now unnatural for us may become perfectly natural.

Having taken the right posture, it is then necessary to make the breath rhythmic by maintaining

an equal count for inhalation and exhalation. One of the commentators on Yoga says that this in-breathing and outbreathing serves as an automatic scrubber, cleansing the system of all impurities. Through lack of conscious direction of our physical functions we have lost the habit of normal regular breathing, and this is one of the main causes of weakness and ill health. With the different postures there are specific breathing exercises given, the purpose of which is to remove the density and lethargy of the body, to purify the nerve tissue and to establish a state of perfect balance. In every case, however, these must be modified to fit the individual need and should never be practiced indiscriminately or without competent guidance.

We must remember that all this physical study is not an end in itself, but merely a preparation for higher metaphysical research. Until we have gained a certain amount of mastery over our outer being, it is impossible to attain inner mastery; but when this preliminary work is done, the next and more important step is the training of the mind, which is accomplished through the practice of discrimination and concentration. Discrimination is that faculty of intelligence which enables us to ascertain the true value of all things in the universe. The right and constant exercise of this

faculty increases the alertness and keenness of the mind. The study of logic, of mathematics and philosophy are especially directed to the cultivation of the power of discrimination; but any systematic effort in our daily life to distinguish between the real and apparent, the essential and non-essential, the fleeting and the lasting will develop it.

Discrimination alone, however, will not safeguard our mental progress; for even though we may discover the real value of certain facts and laws, we are incapable of following them up without the power of concentration. Actually these two forms of mental activity are so inseparable that one cannot advance without the other. Discrimination like a searchlight points the way; concentration supplies the necessary power by which to reach the goal. Concentration means gathering up or focusing our scattered mental energies. As a general must gather together all his military resources before making an attack on the enemy, similarly our mind must assemble all its forces before it can hope to conquer Nature either without or within.

Concentration forms a vital part of Yoga; without it we can accomplish but little, because our mind dissipates its energy and defeats its own ends. The majority of us have not begun to use

the whole of our mind. We use only a fragment and it is for this reason that the field of our accurate knowledge is so limited. The first effort in concentration should be to withhold the mind from unnecessary activities. This is done by persistently restraining all wandering aimless thought, all idle conversation, and all non-essential interests, which now consume so much of our time and energy. We should next begin to diminish the circle of our thought until it is wholly indrawn to the centre and has reached that state which in Yoga is defined as *Ekagra* or one-pointed.

In the preliminary stages it becomes necessary to have a definite concrete point on which to focus the thought,—between the eyebrows, on the tip of the nose, on the heart as a lotus-bud filled with light, on a picture or symbol. Each one can choose whatever appeals to him, provided it has a purifying and strengthening influence. The object is of secondary importance, the chief thing is the mastery of the mind. Just as unbroken horses are useless, so is an untrained mind; and we must sometimes resort even to rigid discipline in order to gain full control over it. As it grows more obedient, however, we are able to draw it gradually from objective to subtler subjective forms.

This leads naturally to the final step,—medi-

tation. Meditation is the most practical of all branches of Yoga; because dealing as it does directly with our innermost life, its only method of expression is silent practice. But meditation does not mean holding the mind in a negative dreamy state or on a vague abstraction. It means the continuous flow of the thought towards the Ideal without any break. It brings the unseen world before us and makes it real to us; then we no longer doubt or have confused ideas regarding spiritual things, but we know. Thus our Ideal becomes an absolute reality for us, and through this realization we are spiritually regenerated. Also the knowledge gained by such realization is perfect and unmistakable. The knowledge acquired through our sense perceptions is often erroneous, but when the mind is purified and the senses are spiritualized, then the vision which comes is free from error and productive of great good.

True meditation cannot be taught by words, because it is beyond words. It has rather to do with the deeper feelings of the soul. First of all we must have eagerness to realize; and the more we cultivate this eagerness, the better fitted we become for the life of meditation. The steadfast practice of meditation lifts us by degrees to a state of consciousness known as *Samadhi* or superconsciousness, which is the ultimate goal of

spiritual Yoga. When we reach this point, we are wholly freed from the bondage of the two lower stages of consciousness, known as the subconscious and the conscious. The subconscious represents the state of *Tamas*, dullness and inertia; the conscious corresponds to *Rajas* or the state of excessive activity; while in *Sattwa*, the state of pure serenity and lightness, we rise to the superconscious. It is when we are firmly established in this state, through the unbroken habit of meditation, that we gain all transcendental knowledge.

The system of Yoga has existed in India from time immemorial and has always been regarded as an exact science, as fully demonstrable as any department of natural science. It does not ask that anything be accepted on hearsay. It declares that if we do certain things, we shall get certain results as surely as in any experiment of chemistry or physics. For instance, it teaches that if a man can observe the spirit of non-injury in his thoughts, words and deeds for a period of twelve years faithfully, he will acquire such subtle spiritual power that even the wild beasts of the jungle will forget their ferocity and become gentle in his presence. Christian saints have been known to experience this and it has been attributed to miraculous power; but in reality it was the natural

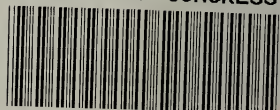
outcome of a certain mode of living and thinking.

If a man, again, practices absolute truthfulness in all that he says, thinks and does, whatever he wills comes to pass; or if he observes complete silence for a certain time, he will gain the power of prophecy. The steadfast practice of continence also will develop the power of healing. The various exercises in breathing and posture, already mentioned, will bring equally definite results in the form of physical strength, will power, and super-sensuous perception. The difficulty is that experiments of this nature require great patience and perseverance; and when we lack these, we cannot help but doubt the plausibility of such claims. But even when we are willing to persist, we must remember that each must do according to his own physical and mental capacity.

Moderation is absolutely necessary in order that we may maintain that perfect equilibrium, without which the goal cannot be reached. Doing too much is just as bad as not doing at all. Balance or evenness of mind is one of the definitions of Yoga given in the Bhagavad-Gita. Skillfulness in action is another. This form of Yoga teaches how a man can take the most direct road to his end and thus avoid all wastefulness. There is nothing mysterious, dangerous or esoteric in

the study of Yoga. It is true that certain psychic powers may be manifested as the result of the practices, such as clairvoyance, clairaudience, thought-reading, etc.; but these are mere passing consequences, which come to us as our inner organism becomes more purified and susceptible to finer vibrations. If we are careful not to attribute undue importance to them and move onward, we shall not be harmed or misled by them. We shall always be safe so long as we hold firmly before our mind's eye the ultimate goal of all the science and practice of Yoga, which is nothing short of direct vision of Truth and God-union.

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